THE ECONOMICS NETWORK

Improving economics teaching and learning for over 20 years

Motivating International Students

A practical guide for economists

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1. International students learning Economics: the UK context

Many international students come to the UK to study economics attracted both by the history of economics in the UK and the excellent teaching and research reputation of many Economics departments. The following quotes* (note 1) suggest that international students enjoy the intellectual challenge of studying in institutions with a high reputation and believe that Economics will give them the opportunity to pursue a wide range of good careers in either the private or public sector:

> 'The opportunity to study at a prestigious institution of international repute, and the promise of intellectual stimulation.'

> ‘I wanted to be part of one of the most appreciated educational systems in the developed world.’

When asked about the best aspects of their Economics course in the UK, students include the quality of teaching and the international environment*:

> ‘Excellent teachers: have a deep knowledge of the subject and know how to transmit it to the students.’

> ‘Meet different people from all over the world, being independent.’

> ‘Meeting international students and learning more about other cultures.’

International competition for quality and cost-effective Economics education is rapidly increasing. UK HE strives to remain an attractive destination for international students, and even expand international recruitment, but faces deep challenges (see for example, **Sastry and Bekhradnia, 2007**). Despite evidence of the UK’s competitive advantage in international education at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels (**Universities UK, 2015, 2016**), politically-driven restrictions are also shaping the sector's international reputation (**Pells, 2016**; **Adams, 2016**; **Beall, 2017**; **Conlon, Ladher and Halterbeck, 2017**).

International students in UK universities provide many benefits, with EU students alone reportedly generating £3.7bn for the UK economy and supporting in excess of 34,000 jobs (**Universities UK, 2014**). But there also a number of challenges posed by international students. UK Economics lecturers have varied responses to the number and diversity of international students in classes, some seeing this as beneficial to students’ learning and others highlighting the difficulties.[note 2]

The importance of motivation in academic learning is recognised by many authors (for examples see **Maclellan, 2005 and Lanzt, 2007**). When we ask cohorts of international and UK lecturers and teachers ‘what constitutes a good lecturer or teacher?’ the responses show that, irrespective of cultural background, there is an expectation that the lecturer or teacher is fundamental in motivating students to learn. There is a shared understanding of the characteristics of a *motivational* lecturer or teacher that includes being passionate, enthusiastic and inspirational, combined with being knowledgeable, clear, structured, available and approachable.

Even the choice of a particular career direction can be influenced by a motivational lecturer or teacher (apart from status and money!). Equally, a number of postgraduate students choose to do research with the academic they find to be most motivating – including having an appealing website or writing in a manner perceived to be enthusiastic. In our experience, no subject in Economics is inherently impossible to make interesting: any subject can be made clear, interesting and motivating or, conversely, confusing, boring and de-motivating.

As lecturers and teachers we are potential role models to all students, and our behaviour ‘can have a significant impact on students’ **Lantz (2007)**. We can therefore mediate openness to diverse ways of being, and contribute to developing and sustaining academic environments where international students feel valued, included and motivated. However, we may inadvertently propagate unhelpful stereotypes regarding other cultures.

Prior to their arrival in the UK, international students will have been successful learners; their skills, knowledge and command of English are to the level required by UK admission criteria, and they will have received advice regarding the challenges of living and studying in the UK. But the challenges encountered when they arrive are often manifested in such unexpected ways that students may struggle to settle into their academic lives. The opinions of individual international students are very important since those who are highly motivated by their experience in the UK can become excellent ambassadors, in turn motivating others. This is implicit in the following quotes:

> ‘I have always loved the British culture, history and the English language. So for me it was the only place where I wanted to study.’*
>
> ‘(…) I already had friends studying in the country.’

Students can now share their thoughts on social media, thus influencing the choices of other students.

Whilst UK universities have for many years organised activities specific to welcoming international students, particularly the induction week, there tends to be a separation of the social from the curricular, in that the presence of international students is visible and explicit in specifically designed social occasions, but invisible and barely implicit in learning and teaching contexts. Regarding this issue it is interesting to comment on the findings from the 2004 and 2008 **Alumni Survey (Economics Graduates)**: the perceptions of alumni regarding their own awareness of cross-cultural issues has increased markedly from 2004 to 2008, but their perception of the role played by the degree itself for awareness of cross-cultural issues has not changed much. These results strongly suggest that there is a lot that can be done within learning and teaching of Economics to further support cross-cultural awareness and fluency of Economics graduates.

By developing an understanding of international students that acknowledges them as able, experienced learners who have been successful in other learning contexts, we can work from the constructive premise that the challenges faced are a result of conflicts between the expectations of the parties involved and their actual experience. International students can be an invaluable asset if we facilitate and value their participation in the learning community. Staff and students alike can gain wider, richer and internationalised perspectives of Economics, and of personal and social choices linked to culture.

Notes

1 Quotations marked with * are drawn from Economics Network (2008) Economics Network Students Survey 2008, available at **http://www.economicsnetwork.ac.uk/projects/stud_survey2008_full.pdf**

2 Quotations marked with + are drawn from Economics Network (2007) Economics Network Lecturer Survey 2007, available at **http://www.economicsnetwork.ac.uk/projects/lec_survey2007.pdf**

2. Cultural diversity and learning and teaching

In this section we share examples of cultural diversity we have experienced that can directly impact on the academic performance, behaviour in lectures and social interactions of international students. These examples support or complement the wealth of published material on this matter (see for example **Ramburuth, 2001**, who investigated the perceptions and practice regarding cross-cultural learning behaviour with implications for teaching, learning and diversity management in Economics; and **Carroll, 2005**).

In some cultural traditions, scholars are treated with great respect as societal role models. Students from such cultural traditions may address us with ceremony emphasising or exaggerating our academic title, and combining it with our first name. No matter how many times we invite the student to call us by our first name alone, they may never feel at ease to do so. Also, some students may seek our advice on personal issues of a serious nature, beyond the scope of normal pastoral care. In these situations it is best all round to refer the students to specialised support services within the institution.

Knowledge is, for many, considered as having an intrinsic value for humanity, with no ownership or attribution to its creators. The fundamental value of learning and of researching to become a better human being is in contrast with applied research and learning for a career and material gains:*

> ‘My main objective was to learn economics rather than getting a degree, however, currently I just wish I could finish my degree as soon as possible because I am not learning what I wanted. I have become a degree seeker instead of knowledge seeker.’

Referencing can be meaningless if we believe we should integrate learnt knowledge as our own. This is fundamental to understanding why so many students are considered to be colluding and plagiarising even after being explicitly told that this is unacceptable, and that they can face exclusion.

Top Tip

The purpose of referencing escapes many international students, and is not an immediately easy task as it implies being very attentive to detail. Exemplifying how to reference properly using our own work somehow humanises the experience. Asking the students to practise referencing under our guidance and giving students immediate feedback can be very helpful.

There are also implications for answering exam questions and writing essays. Many students will consider that basic questions that check factual knowledge cannot be *just* that. They take such questions as opportunities to show how much they know around the subject without ever stating the obvious because that *is* obvious and the lecturer or teacher already knows that. As a result, such students produce long answers that do not address what is asked, and that often have to be marked as wrong. Similarly writing essays can be a problem.* Some students will produce work that is three times as long; that does not address the immediate concerns of the essay but is instead speculative; where no distinction is provided between facts and opinions; that is poorly referenced, or not referenced at all. This tends to be an issue when students first start their degrees but can have a big impact on their motivation:*

> ‘Essay writing during the first year was a little difficult.’

Respect in some cultures also manifests itself by not looking straight at others, so that there is no eye contact. We could interpret the student as lacking in confidence, being extremely shy, not being interested or even being rude. This is relevant when students give presentations as they may receive lower marks.

Top Tip

Students who do not look at us directly when talking or listening, respond constructively when we explain sensitively how such behaviour can be interpreted. Students need to consider *negotiating with themselves* and changing a behaviour that may be core to their culture.

In some countries, arriving late, chatting with peers or answering the mobile phone in lectures or tutorials is not an issue. We have given lectures in some countries where students take notes whilst answering their mobile phones, or leave the lecture halfway through and come back later without any form of justification. When international students chat during lectures or tutorials, particularly in a language other than English, it can be distracting, irritating and interpreted as a lack of respect. However, students may be trying to support each other’s learning as expressed in the following quote from an Economics lecturer:

> ‘In the past I have occasionally had overseas students talking in class – but this was usually one of them translating for the others.’

Interrupting or talking at the same time as other people can be considered normal and even desirable in some cultures, as it indicates people are paying attention and are interested. Yet, in the UK it may be interpreted as disruptive, aggressive or rude. We need to address these issues early on, by explaining to students clearly that such behaviour is distracting and considered disrespectful.

Some students will want to give us presents, as an expression of respect. It could be food and drinks, but it could also be expensive goods (or money and vouchers) and even forbidden imports such as stuffed crocodiles. Simply telling such students that we cannot accept presents does not solve the problem, as in a number of cultures it is polite to accept a present only after having refused to accept it a number of times. So students will insist that we accept, as it is part of a cultural ritual for them to insist and for us to refuse! Such students can seem to be intrusive and as trying to ingratiate themselves with us in some way.

Top Tip

One approach to deter students from giving us presents is to tell them that we cannot personally accept presents as such gifts become university property and have to be formally recorded (check your university policy on gifts).

Shaking hands energetically, patting each other on the back, gesticulating, talking loudly and standing very close to others may be the norm in some cultures but considered as overtly aggressive in the UK. Unless students are told about these interpretations explicitly, they will not necessarily notice that they are behaving differently to others.

Making quick decisions, taking initiative or volunteering information before developing a strong sense of belonging to a group is not expected in some cultures. However, in the UK reluctance to do the above could be interpreted as passive or non-assertive behaviour. This can lead to some students feeling they are not given the time to think and having to accept other people's decisions, particularly in group work. Making these differences explicit to all may ease relationships between students.

Some students will be surprised that there may be fewer senior female academics in the UK than in their country of origin; others will consistently not acknowledge the presence and professional competence of female academics and will only accept male academics.

Top Tip

Some students feel uncomfortable in one-to-one or small group meetings where they are the only person of that gender. Leaving the door open of the office or room where the meeting is taking place, and offering the student a seat by the door can reassure them.

Some international students will think that English, Irish, Scottish and Welsh are the same; and many non-European international students may even assume that all European students (including UK students) are the same. Likewise some UK students may believe that all Africans, for example, are the same. This form of stereotyping can create irritation for students and staff alike.

3. Being aware of language and cultural references

- **3.1. Language issues for students**

- 3.2. Strong regional accents
- 3.3. Particular uses of English
- 3.4. Culturally specific references
- Note

3.1. Language issues for students

English language is an important factor when international students choose to study in the UK. A good command of English is a highly valued skill for many professionals across the world, and achieving language fluency is a goal for international students. Although institutions set certain language standards as entry requirement, the monitoring of these standards tends to be subcontracted to language units within the institutions.

One issue faced by many international students is the sudden realisation when they arrive in the UK that despite their language qualifications they still find it difficult to understand what others say and others find it difficult to understand them. This is usually often unexpected and can be very disheartening. As a result many international students become very self-conscious which can lead them to avoid speaking with others and to isolation.

Often international students, particularly those new to the UK, are more fluent in written than in spoken English. They may not be prepared for specialised jargon, and initially being taught and tested in English can be unexpectedly difficult. A further issue is that students may feel inhibited to ask for clarification which can affect their performance.

Schmitt (2005) reports that the vocabulary considered sufficiently large for native English speakers is 40,000 words whilst for non-native English speakers entering university it is 10,000 words. **Schmitt *et al.* (2001)** found the average vocabulary of university-aged English language students in several countries to be just under 4600 words. As would be expected with such a limited vocabulary, students' understanding and progress are likely to be affected. A study by **Shanahan and Meyer (2003)** found that first-year students of Economics for whom English was a second language, did significantly worse in end-of-semester examination results than students for whom English was a first language.

The following quotes reflect some difficulties initially faced by some international students studying Economics in the UK:*

> ‘At the beginning of the course it was difficult to grasp more technical and academic terms, but I would not see that as a long-term problem.’
>
> ‘I had hardly any experience with essay writing, which resulted in several bad marks at the beginning of my course.’

A high proportion of international students of Economics in the UK report that their learning had been affected in some way due to language:*

> ‘To some extent, yes. It doesn't affect my understanding, but when it comes to asking questions and writing essays, I do have some problems.’

International students who are native or near-native English speakers, and to some extent UK students whose first language is not English or who come from areas with strong regional accents, can also struggle. The practical suggestions on learning and teaching we share in this chapter may be useful for them as well.

Many international students initially rely on varied verbal and non-verbal cues to understand what is being said, including pace and emphasis, lip reading, facial expressions, hand movements, multisensory signals and contextual prompts. Strong regional accents, colloquialism, the use of unusual phrasal verbs, jargon, abbreviations, acronyms and references to culturally specific information can all obscure the message. Being aware of language and cultural references is very important, as commented by a UK Economics lecturer:

> ‘My most serious issue is providing material in language that is understandable by ESL students. I am searching for ideas all the time – [the Economics Network site] helps me in this regard.’

3.2. Strong regional accents

It is inevitable to encounter strong accents in an international environment whether individuals are native speakers or not. Both international and UK students consider language issues as barriers to learning:*

> ‘The seminar tutor should speak better English, as a strong Chinese accent makes it sometimes very hard to follow, even for my native English speaking friends.’

> ‘Use of more understandable English by the tutors would make seminars far more useful. They can be a little useless when the group cannot understand the tutor and the tutor cannot understand the students when questions are raised.’

Whilst it may be expected that in international environments people may not immediately understand each other, and that this should not necessarily be a barrier to communication, a strong accent can make the a lecture or tutorial incomprehensible. From the students’ perspective, struggling to follow what we are saying because of our accent can be very frustrating and from their perspective, unacceptable. It is therefore crucial that the delivery of content does not rely exclusively on the spoken word.

Another problem is when students ask a question or offer an opinion but we cannot understand them due to their accent. Asking the students to repeat or rephrase may be embarrassing and counterproductive. Sometimes, it is tempting to pretend we have understood the contribution and try to move on. On a practical note, from our experience, the more we engage with different accents the more we are likely to come to understand them.

Top Tip

A constructive approach when we cannot understand students’ contributions due to strong accents is to ask the student to write the question/comment on a piece of paper for us to read, and then for us to write the question on the board for the benefit of all.

3.3. Particular uses of English

Colloquialism, idiomatic and unusual expressions, phrasal verbs, jargon, abbreviations and acronyms

Calling a spade a spade. We should avoid using colloquialisms, idiomatic or unusual expressions that take a long time to understand and learn. One of us recently heard a specialist referring to ‘looking at the accounts with *a beady eye*’ thought it was an acronym '*a BDI*', and asked what it was. So if we do use such expressions, we should explain what they mean and why we are using them.

Most international students will know common phrasal verbs including *to stand up*. Less common phrasal verbs can be very difficult to decode and even puzzling. For example, what does to *stand down* mean? Is it the opposite of *to stand up*? If so, how can we physically do it? To develop awareness of such unusual uses can take a long time! Can we use alternatives maybe closer to the Latin or Greek root? For example, instead of *to stand down* we might use *resign*. Linguistically related to phrasal verbs are also expressions that use the same particles as phrasal verbs but in a different order and which have very different meanings – these can be very confusing. Examples of this include *to set off* and *offset*; and *set up* and *upset*.

We should write down all specialised jargon, abbreviations (e.g.; i.e.) or acronyms (BDI!), and what they mean in legible print so that we can refer to this when we use them. It is most helpful if we can refer to a glossary that we have previously made available to students (as **discussed in section 6**). Also, if year after year, international students make a spelling mistake writing specialised jargon or expressions, we should refer to this, and maybe suggest a way of memorising the word/expression properly.

3.4. Culturally specific references

Examples are important to illustrate information and to help students pay attention to the lecture or tutorial. However, if examples are specific to cultural references they are meaningful only to some students and many international students may effectively be excluded. An illustration of this is when we asked non-European international students and staff about 'Asterix and Obelix' and very few recognise these characters.[note 3] Further examples include cultural, social, political, religious or historical references based on the UK, USA and Europe; and TV and radio programmes, films, magazines, newspapers, cartoons and books. Many international students frequently prefer to watch and listen to programmes and to read sources from their countries of origin. So if we want to use local examples, we need to explain the context and why we are using them, and if applicable we could bring a copy to the lecture or tutorial to show.

In cases where our lectures focus on UK specific systems—say, the UK tax system—some international students may feel that this is not relevant to them. We can explain that the underlying thinking and practicalities about systems in the UK are transferable to other systems, and that it is of value to analyse different models of organisation and to learn how to access the relevant information.

Top Tip

The motivation of international students can increase if we ask them to contribute with information relevant to their country. For example, we can ask students to verify the specific impact that a global trend has on a particular economic aspect of their country.

Note

3. *The Adventures of Asterix* is a series of hardback French comic strips, first published in 1959, very popular with children and adults alike, in many European countries (**http://www.asterix.com/**)

4. Promoting interaction for integration

- **4.1. Interaction in the lecture and tutorial, step-by step**
- **4.2. Games and case studies**

- **4.3. Group work outside the lecture or tutorial**
- **4.4. International students giving presentations**
- **4.5. Online interaction**

In Economics in particular, poor integration is a missed opportunity for very interesting discussions as international students represent a variety of economic regimes from all over the world. Students from diverse academic traditions also have complementary skills that can be used as a resource for learning. An example is that some international students have higher levels of mathematical ability but struggle with economic intuition and interpretation of results compared with UK students. Interaction that specifically acknowledges these complementary skills can be valuable as international students can check the mathematics of UK students and UK students can check the intuition and explanations of the international students **(Long and Barnett, 2008)**.

Even though many international and UK students would like to interact more, they often misinterpret each others' intentions. For example, a study found that Australian students often think that international students prefer not to mix with them, and vice versa **(Volet and Ang, 1998)**.

Below we discuss how to achieve integration through interaction. We analyse the space provided by the lecture theatre to interact; we give step-by step guidance on how to promote and monitor interaction in the lecture or tutorial; we discuss issues relevant to games and case studies; we discuss group work outside the lecture or tutorial; and we share views on e-interaction.

There may be students who do not like to engage in activities. As long as we provide alternatives for these students to learn (e.g. watching the behaviour of others; trying to look into emerging patterns on their own) we are not excluding them from learning.

4.1. Interaction in the lecture and tutorial, step-by step

In our experience, the lecture space is fundamental to initiating interaction between all students under our guidance. Sharda (1995) highlights the importance of the cultural awareness and sensitivity of staff in supporting the workings of culturally diverse groups, and that group work in class provides opportunities for staff to monitor groups' social dynamics.

The size and seating arrangements in lecture theatres often make them appear unwelcoming spaces, and students tend to sit next to their friends. So a common justification against embedding interaction in lectures is that it can only be done in small groups, and in rooms where students can walk around.

Activities for interaction include those proposed by **Sloman and Mitchell (2002)** such as anticipating outcomes to scenarios presented; comparing notes; sharing doubts; filling in gaps in handouts; answering questions; sharing thoughts relating to a quote; anticipating trends in curves; and predicting behaviours.

In our experience, groups of three make good groups as everyone has a chance to contribute fairly, in a short time. Bigger groups may defeat the purpose.

When planning these activities for the lecture, we allocate 1 minute per student per group, plus 1 minute to write down keywords, plus 1 minute per group to share in plenary. In a variation of this format, we give 1 minute for students to reflect on the question on their own and to write down keywords, and then another 2 minutes for students to share in small groups. Instead of asking groups to share in plenary, we can show the students the answers to the activities proposed and give them another 3 minutes to compare in their groups with what they had achieved.

We specifically ask students to form groups of three with others they have not worked with before. We say and write something along the lines of ‘Please find two people sitting within your reach that you have not worked with before.’ In the following schematics we suggest ways to form groups of three. Students sitting in adjacent rows across a corridor can easily stand up and change places. This gives enough variety to group membership.

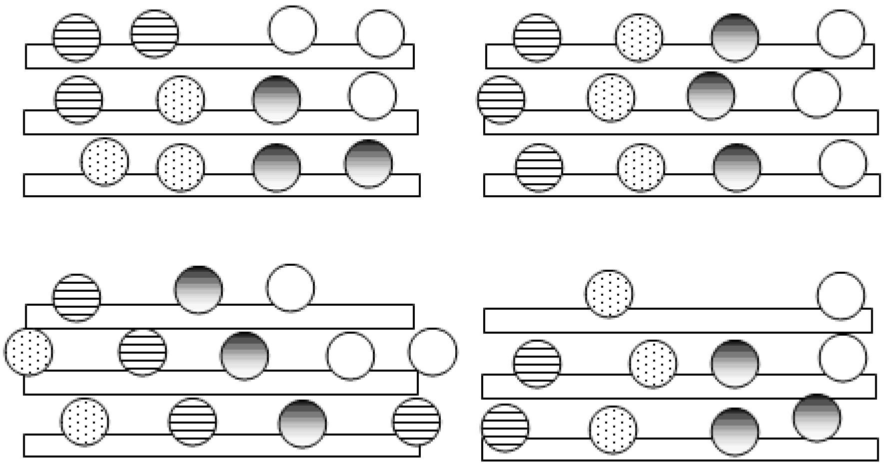

Figure 1 Schematic of sitting arrangements in an amphitheatre type room where the rectangles represent rows, and same-fill adjacent circles represent students working in the same group.

Top Tip

If students are reluctant to interact they may need some encouragement or clarification. Having written instructions and aims, and reaffirming the benefits of interaction, is usually sufficient for students to engage. We should give the choice to students who prefer to work on their own to do so.

International and UK students generally enjoy working this way and are constructive about overcoming difficulties in communication to complete the activities successfully.

Frequently, students start by introducing themselves and where they come from, which is a great step for integration.

Our observations over the years lead us to conclude that there are a number of valuable outcomes of proposing such activities, for motivating integration of international students:

1. Students work together who might not otherwise interact.
2. Engaging in such activities on a regular basis prepares students to listen to different ways of expression including different accents, and different culturally informed views.
3. Students tend to leave the lectures in mixed, rather than in the initial same-cultural background, groups.
4. This is a constructive foundation for more demanding group work outside the lecture.

Top Tip

As students come to expect working in mixed groups in lectures they no longer sit next to their friends and clusters of same-cultural background students tend to disperse. Apart from integration in the lecture, interaction may also nurture informal peer support networks.

Interaction in the lecture motivates international students and further energises the class. We find that it no longer takes most of the semester or academic year for international students to develop enough trust in us and in the rest of the group to be willing to contribute.

4.2. Games and case studies

Using games and case studies in lectures or seminars can help make Economics lectures and tutorials more meaningful and help to motivate students (see for example **Sloman and Mitchell, 2002**; and **Volpe, 2002**). When asked about aspects of their Economics degree that could be improved* students refer to more interactive elements, such as games, experiments and role-play.

There are three issues we feel important to address when considering such approaches in an international environment.

1. We need to be realistic in our planning of how long the activities take, so that the conclusions at the end are not rushed, which can lead to international students being unable to follow.
2. International students may need longer to understand why games and case studies are relevant for their learning.
3. Following instructions with jargon that international students cannot recognise can be de-motivating. Even if we reassure the students that they will understand once they engage with the activity, it is still very frustrating to try to do something they have not understood.

Top Tip

Enriching the instructions of games and case studies with multisensory resources can help international students better understand and recall information.

For example, a game with very simple instructions such as ‘Setting up a pit market’, used to introduce the supply and demand model, can be initially very confusing for international students. So how can multisensory resources be of help? Do all international students know what a *pit market* is? Why not show a photograph? When the roles of buyers and sellers are allocated, can we enrich the verbal instructions with visual or auditory cues? Small changes can make it easier to memorise the roles so we could allocate the **b**uyers (and highlight the **b** for buyers) with the **b**lack cards (and highlight the **b** in black) to make it easier to remember. Also can we complement this with showing and keeping visible the colour of the cards? Can we use a simple cartoon to explain the instructions?

4.3. Group work outside the lecture or tutorial

Group work can be invaluable for students to acquire and develop values and skills. Equally, it can be very frustrating and discourage students from interacting. If this is the case when all group members have attended the same or comparable educational system, having a mixed international and UK membership can bring far more complexity to group work. Different (and divergent) unspoken culturally-influenced values, expectations and prior skills become more salient when trying to comply with deadlines. Our observations indicate that students who experience culturally mixed groups regard anticipated difficulties as manageable supporting the findings of **Volet and Ang (1998)** and those of **De Vita (2005: 77)**. We too find it important to share these affirmative outcomes of culturally diverse group work with all students to remove unhelpful preconceptions. **Carroll (2005)** also addresses some interesting issues related to group work.

Before suggesting international students work in groups, it is important to consider the following issues carefully.

1. Suggesting group work at the beginning of the course is not wise as some international students will still be struggling with language, learning how systems work, and trying to access information including the library, internet and intranet, and VLEs. They may therefore be unable fully and equally to participate in group work.

2. International and UK students interact better in groups if they have already had plenty of opportunities to work together during lectures and tutorials as suggested before. Still we have to be aware that unless we do the group allocation, UK and international students might not mix.

Top Tip

In group allocation we need to be sensitive as international conflicts can make some students reluctant to work with others. We must make it clear to all students that if there is a reason why they would like a different group allocation, they can contact us in confidence.

3. Whilst in some countries, students have more exposure to assessed group work than in the UK, in other countries group work may be considered as not real learning. So whilst some international students will have very professional, proactive and constructive approaches to group work others will be uninterested and disengaged.

4. To assess the process we can ask all students to submit reflective journals. Self-regulation and keeping records of emails exchanged, when meetings took place, what was discussed and decided and who attended can be very useful for us to balance who did what and when. Our experience is that many international students do not understand the relevance of reflective journals. Can we provide them with examples and can we make it explicit that these are part of the assessment?

5. We need to clarify what we expect to get from group work; what the roles are within the group; how we expect the group to self-regulate and that all contribute fairly; the typical barriers to group work and how they might be overcome; and what students can gain and what the challenges might be.

For example, in many cases, working in groups with international and UK membership can be slow, with the potential for misunderstandings. Some international students feel that they are not given the opportunities to express themselves, are being misunderstood intentionally, and are being rushed to make decisions. Some UK students may feel that the progress is insufficient and they are effectively wasting time, not learning as much, and that they will be marked down. Some other international students with more experience of group work may feel that UK students do not make enough effort.

Top Tip

Make explicit to all students the values and skills they can gain from group work and the added value of an international membership. Also be clear about the difficulties that groups with a culturally-diverse membership can pose and how the difficulties may be manifested in practice.

Shanahan and Meyer (2003) observed that awarding bonus points for completion of a non-traditional curricular task related to learning issues resulted in increased student responses, and supported students' perceptions of the legitimacy of the task as integral, rather than external, to the course. An equivalent approach can be incorporated regarding knowledge and understanding of different cultures as an item that contributes to the final assessment of group work. We first need to ensure how specific we expect students to be in return about what they have learnt from each culture presented in the group.

4.4. International students giving presentations

Some international students may not have encountered this type of academic situation, and some may be too uncomfortable with their way of expression in English, as expressed by an Economics student:*

> '(…) in terms of presentations it was quite problematic for me to speak in front of people.'

Asking international students to give presentations can result in unnecessary tension. Adjustments may help the student feel more comfortable with the situation. For example, would the student prefer giving the presentation in a smaller room, to a smaller audience? Or maybe to read from a script while sitting down?

Consider whether allowances should be made for oral fluency of international students when giving presentations. **McMahon (2007)** argues that since students will be assumed to have a very good command of English on finishing their degree in the UK, they should be judged in the same way as UK students. However, international students may sometimes feel it unfair to be penalised due to their use of language. We suggest that if such a criterion is to be adopted, international students should be given plenty of support on their presentation skills, and staff assessing the presentation should give specific feedback on what and how exactly the use of language can be improved, so that international students can work towards specific goals.

All students preparing to give presentations have to be aware of the diversity of audience needs including those of (other) international students. We can specify what we do in our practice to support the learning of international students, including making available materials beforehand; writing down questions; making references available; and responding to questions and comments in an affirmative manner. We can formalise criteria relating to clarity of the presentation to international audiences in the evaluation sheet.

Top Tip

Avoid asking international students to read aloud in lectures or tutorials as this can cause embarrassment for those who are self-conscious about their pronunciation, particularly at the beginning of their course.

4.5. Online interaction

With Virtual Learning Environments (VLEs) and social networking platforms we can communicate with students in a way that makes effective use of our time. In addition, outside the academic context, and irrespective of language and cultural differences, many students are increasingly using social networking sites. If we use these means to enrich our teaching we may facilitate students' engaging with the subject.

Social networking can be used to great effect to promote learning of academic content and interaction of international and UK students in and outside the class. Communicating academic content using spaces students use to socialise seems to make the students perceive the subject and the lecturer or teacher as familiar and motivating. However, we would like to caution that some colleagues feel that they effectively spend more time moderating students' contributions. Good training on advantages and disadvantages, as well as on the time management skills required is recommended before we consider proposing their use as learning tools.

5. Being sensitive with questions, answers and comments

- 5.1. Offering questions and inviting comments
- 5.2. Responding to questions/comments
- 5.3. Supporting international students in sharing doubts and comments

5.1. Offering questions and inviting comments

One of the recurrent comments about international students is that they do not contribute in lectures or tutorials. The classic 'Are there any questions?' followed by an uncomfortable silence, is often used to justify moving on quickly. But do we find it easy to interrupt the Dean or Vice Chancellor with a question or comment without feeling that it may seem obvious or irrelevant to the rest of the audience? International students have the added tension of simultaneously internally debating how to articulate the question or comment in 'good English'. In our view, questions should be used as offering opportunities to learn. However, they can sometimes be felt as threats.

> **Top Tip**
>
> If we want international students to contribute to a discussion we have to anticipate that initially they may struggle to find the right words or expressions, and may need more time than UK students. In addition, international students are more likely to contribute with questions and opinions when they feel safe that they will not be ridiculed for their English.

An approach we have adopted in our practice that motivates international students to answer questions is as follows:

1. We avoid asking questions directly of individual students, whether international or UK.

2. We are also particularly aware of the difficulties in presenting international students with a text that they have not had an opportunity to prepare, and asking them to respond to questions. If we want to consider written material not made available beforehand, we must give enough time for international students to read it. A good approach is that we read the material twice over in silence, and that usually corresponds to the time many international students take to read once.

3. We always write the question down with clearly legible handwriting (or have it already written in slide shows, OHTs, etc.) and keep it visible so that international students can refer back to it without having to ask us to repeat. This has two practical advantages as we avoid the following:

   a. when we repeat the question, we are likely to rephrase it and generate added questions or slight variations from the original one, which can confuse international students;

   b. international students may not realise at first that we are asking a question (particularly if we do not use emphasis), and may worry that we think they are not paying attention.

4. We give students 3 minutes to discuss in groups of three what the answer/answers might be.

5. We reassure the students that:

a. We can all learn from doubts, so doubts are learning resources.

b. All interpretations are initially valid, and initially we are more interested in diversity rather than focus on the quality of the contributions.

c. We are more interested in giving students opportunities to test their own understanding than in assessing their individual knowledge at that point in time. This way we get to know and can then clarify, for example, plausible or intuitive but wrong views, that several students may have.

d. The more difficulties and misconceptions raised and elucidated before the exams, the better for all!

e. Abstract, complex concepts need time to mature and become clear.

f. Inevitably, some students will be focusing more at some times than others, and together in groups they may have got all or most of the message.

6. We suggest that one of the students writes down the answers produced by the group on a separate A4 piece of paper, clarifying that we are interested in the combined contribution and not on who contributed what.

7. Once the groups have been talking for 3 minutes we remind them that they should start writing notes on what they want to share, and we give them an extra minute to do so. In our experience this refocuses the students on the task and supports them in being succinct.

8. To get the attention of very animated students we clap three or four times.

9. Because of time constraints, we do not ask all the groups to share their contributions in the lecture. We randomly select two or three groups to read out their findings with one of the group members reading the group notes.

10. We ask all groups to share their contributions on a VLE or by email.

11. We remind them that whilst the posting will be done by one of the group members, it is important that the comments are anonymous, i.e. we do not identify which group member contributed what.

12. Being realistic: even if only two groups share their contributions in the lecture, we need to allocate 4 minutes for group work and 3 minutes for sharing.

Top Tip

International students are more likely to contribute and to take risks if there is a shared responsibility for the contributions and they are not the sole focus of attention. Even students with strong accents do not generally have problems in contributing when they are talking with their neighbours.

In our experience if a group interpreted the question differently from what we had originally expected, they typically apologise for interpreting the ‘wrong way’. We reassure them that their contribution is still welcome. This is a good opportunity to clarify how to interpret types of question and is valuable preparation for exams and essays. We should take note in the session plan of the different interpretations of a question as this can inform us when writing exam questions, and reflect on how to make the question clearer. If several groups interpret our question in ways we had not expected, it is a strong indication that the question needs to be rephrased.

This approach has enabled us to probe and learn misconceptions students have regarding the topics taught; to reflect on the areas of our lecturing we need to clarify further; and to help international students feel that they can contribute to everyone's learning regardless of their perceived communication difficulties.

In seminars and tutorials, where more time can be allocated for each question and student cohorts are smaller, we can invite all groups to share the answers obtained.

Top Tip

In tutorials, groups can show their responses using a visualiser or putting up their contributions on the wall so that all students can go round the room and read them. We need to allocate 10 minutes for this, but we can be sure that all feel focused and energised.

Advantages of this approach include that:

a. we save time, as we avoid groups repeating or rephrasing the same items;
b. we avoid the potential distractions that result from listening to the contents of all posters
c. to tick or add an item to a poster implies that at least one member of each group is paying enough attention;
d. all groups feel they have contributed, even if to inform us that all items have been covered by previous groups.

5.2. Responding to questions/comments

When it comes to responding to questions or comments from international students we have adopted the following approach.

If we understood the question being asked, we start by repeating the question or comment (or rephrasing it, particularly if it needs to be simplified) to check that our understanding represents the student's meanings. We write down the question/comment or its keywords on the board. Very importantly, this gives the opportunity for all students to read the contribution, and be prepared to engage with the answer.

We thank the student for their contribution. We may say 'thank you', 'that is a relevant point' or 'that's an interesting question'. What we are signalling to all the students is that we welcome their willingness to contribute, and that the whole group can benefit. Even if it is a request to repeat what we have just said, we thank the student as we can anticipate that several international students may also have missed that particular point.

Top Tip

Aim to keep answers short and simple, and avoid lengthy answers or too much detail as international students may be unable to follow. Writing keywords and drawing visual elements such as a diagram or flow chart on the board can help.

When we finish, we can check that our response has addressed the question and open the possibility for the students to contact us if issues remain. For example, we may say 'Does this answer your question?', 'I hope this answers your question', 'Any issues remaining please come and see me afterwards', 'We can discuss this further at the tutorial/seminar'. We can invite the students to post queries on the VLE or by email, e.g. 'Please email me to remind me of this conversation'.

What if we perceive a question or a comment as provocative? This is where we need to be very aware of the cultural differences that we have mentioned in **section 2**. Cultural differences influence the responses we expect from International students, and our interpretations of unexpected responses. Students may sound inappropriately aggressive, apologetic or disengaged/uninterested and be genuinely unaware of being perceived that way.

When there are misunderstandings or misperceptions that are uncomfortable or potentially threatening for those involved, it is best to try to safeguard everyone's values and worth. For example, if we feel that an international student is undermining what we are saying, we can anticipate that there might be a misunderstanding and we can ask the student to specify what the misunderstanding is. If the student is not co-operative, we can diffuse the situation by suggesting that the discussion is continued at a later date, e.g. on the VLE.

Unless there is a way of communicating sensitively to the student how that behaviour may be interpreted, the student will not know, and may never develop the appropriate behaviour. In our experience, we have never had to take more severe action such as asking the student to leave the room or having to call the security, and hope that we will never be faced with such uncomfortable situations!

5.3. Supporting international students in sharing doubts and comments

Top Tip

International students should write down their contributions (questions, comments) and can read from the script. Students tend to be more focused and clear using this method than when trying to contribute from memory alone. This also makes it possible for us to see the script if we cannot understand the student's accent.

International students may be particularly concerned about forgetting what they want to say or about expressing themselves unclearly. In our experience, giving opportunities for them to work in small groups in the lecture or tutorial results in more questions from them.

Once the question or comment is clear to us, we can summarise it for the benefit of all present and, if relevant, can write it down on the board.

The focus is always on enabling communication and not making the students feel inadequate for their accent or their different sentence constructions

6. Making written information accessible

Unless international students can prepare for lectures and tutorials in good time, they may struggle and be unable to contribute. In this section we explain particular issues faced by international students, the types of materials we can make available and access to such materials.

For international students, reading and processing information can initially take a long time. Becoming acquainted with the language and ways of representing data, checking unclear cultural references, and translating words and expressions may all be part of the process. We should therefore make the resources available to the students in good time, so they can prepare at their own pace and with access to dictionaries or online resources.

If we make any changes to any information international students have received or have already available, including criteria of assessment, submission deadlines, meetings, teaching times and venues, we need to inform the students orally and in writing so that they have more chances of getting the information. Waiting until the end of a lecture or tutorial to make these announcements is not a good approach. Many students will already be getting ready to go, which increases the background noise, and international students in particular are more likely to be tired and to misunderstand or not hear.

Materials we can make available include lecture and tutorial notes and handouts; slideshows; glossaries and vocabulary lists; list of abbreviations, acronyms, jargon and new words; reading lists; previous exam papers; copies of marked essays; and reflective journals. Such materials can be made available on the intranet and library, as e-booklets or paper copies, and should be available well in advance of being needed (at beginning of the year or start of each term or semester). We can also ask students to research and/or read new material, revise previously covered material, or answer questions that we may post in advance of lectures or tutorials.

Petropoulou (2001) shares the issues faced by international exchange students that join courses at third year level, and who do not share the background knowledge needed to solve some problems. She has supported such students by meeting them outside class and by assigning extra reading in advance to prepare them for material to come.

When designing written materials we should reflect on the following:

1. Is there too much information in the slides and handouts making them difficult and unattractive to read?
2. Is there space for students to write notes?
3. Do materials include visually interesting elements?
4. Are equations, graphs, tables legible when printed?
5. Are the font type and size used legible?

To save paper, we may be tempted to fit two pages in an A4 copy but the material becomes very hard and unattractive to read. If we provide photocopies in the library, we should choose copies that are not twisted, blurred, illegible or dirty, as all these aspects greatly affect legibility and are unappealing.

Some international students will have excellent IT skills, but others may be unable to access written materials that are exclusively reliant on IT literacy, particularly at the beginning of their course. For example, do all students understand the library systems? Do they know how to access virtual libraries and data catalogues? Can they access the VLE? Are they happy with email? If not, can we guide the international students to courses available at the university? Otherwise, can we make paper copies available at the library? Can we suggest those students who have the skills teach those who have not?

Top Tip

Whilst access to written materials may be difficult for some new international students, they should not be excluded from learning that depends on having read materials beforehand. We can give them the chance to learn from other students in the lecture or tutorial.

Here is how we give students the chance to learn from others any relevant information they could not access:

1. We need to plan 5 minutes in our session plan

2. It is most important that we do not make students feel guilty for not having prepared.
3. We ask students to form groups where at least one member has engaged with the reading to share what they remember.
4. We ask them to write keywords on an A4 sheet of paper.
5. We ask two or three groups to share in plenary what they remember.

This allows all students to have a general understanding of the issues we wanted addressed before the lecture or tutorial. It creates good opportunities for international and UK students to interact constructively, and to engage with each other's interpretations. Rather than doing progressively less preparation for the lectures or tutorials, relying on someone else to have done it, our observations are that more students come prepared as they enjoy the social interaction and sharing of their learning.

7. Assessment and feedback

- **Multiple choice questions**
- **Feedback**

In relation to assessment we would like to focus on multiple choice questions. Other aspects of assessment of international students have be explored in a number of recent publications (e.g. **Ryan, 2005**; and **Brown and Joughin 2007**).

Multiple choice questions

Multiple choice questions present particular barriers to international students: the right answer should be unambiguously right; all the other answers should be plausible but wrong. The issue for international students is that because of language, the level of certainty can become lower or, equally, the level of ambiguity can become higher.

It is also difficult for new international students to interpret questions and to relate the theory with the questions asked, and to relate doubts and questions to those already addressed in frequently asked questions. So they need to be given opportunities to learn and practise the language in this particular context. Can we provide lists of typical language used in questions? Can past exam papers be provided at the beginning of the year and be worked on in tutorials?

Feedback

The aim of feedback is to support learning in relation to stated outcomes. In other words, it should provide a link between the student's present performance and future targets:

> 'Personally feedback is one of the most important elements to improving.' (Student, Economics Network survey)

Feedback (or lack of it) affects all students of Economics. In the case of international students, there are particular barriers as they may not be familiar with classifications, assessment rubrics or indeed the difference between writing conventions for essays, reports, or reflective journals. This is expressed by an Economics student:*

> ‘Learning experiences have not prepared me for the teaching and assessment style used in the UK as it differs very much from the system I am used to.’

It is worth remembering the need to be explicit: the ‘what’ the ‘how’ and the ‘why’. We should be explicit well in time before any students engage with work that will be assessed so that they have the chance to understand how learning outcomes relate to assessment. No feedback or poor feedback results in depriving students of information they need to develop.

Some Economics students feel they are left ignorant of their progress due to lack of continuous assessment and that there is too much dependence on the final exam. Comments include:*

> ‘We rarely get any feedback on our submitted work.’

> ‘Very little feedback received through all courses.’

Realistically, assessing students’ work is very time-consuming and possibly one of the most unrewarding tasks we have to engage with. Assessing the work of international students can be more complex and more time-consuming as we need to be sensitive to their use of the language. The cumulative spelling difficulties, unusual use of words, and uncommon sentence structure can make it very hard for us to feel constructive and to interpret appreciatively the meanings behind what is stated, and to mark the work fairly.

To return assessed work in a timely manner puts a lot of pressure on us. But unless we do so, the assessment is unlikely to be of much use as it can require a lot of effort to refocus on the work many weeks after it was submitted. Hence the large piles of uncollected essays when students have already moved onto something else! To empathise with this, think of the effort it may require for us to try to engage constructively with reviewers’ comments regarding a paper we have submitted for publication three months earlier! The same happens to students:*

> ‘[Feedback is] normally received too late to be of any help’; ‘Highly poor at my university, you have to chase lecturers for feedback.’

To give one-to-one feedback to all international students is unrealistic as there is not enough time when student cohorts are large. But we can understand students’ frustrations expressed below.* Let us just imagine that instead of detailed feedback from reviewers on a paper we submitted for publication, we have general areas of improvement for the errors we have made!

> ‘I would have loved a lot more feedback and criticism specifically about my own assignments rather than discussing them in groups.’

> ‘If the lecture give feedback one-to-one, it is very useful; just give classification is useless.’

Hyatt (2005) discusses types of feedback, and the importance of giving encouragement and appreciation to students with the purpose of establishing and maintaining good academic and social relationships.

One way to humanise formative comments is with the following structure:

1. We start with a brief sentence of appreciation for the effort/time/interest the student has invested.
2. We describe what has been done well.
3. We highlight three points that need further development.
4. We finish by expressing hope that the student’s future work may gain from our feedback.

In our experience, following such a structure makes the task of marking large numbers of essays and exams more personable and focused, coherent and fair for everyone involved, as all students get the same amount and type of comments, and we work more efficiently.

The following suggestions are designed to make students gain an appreciation of the challenges of assessing work, including the time taken to assess and to articulate feedback.

1. Give students as much preparation as you can prior to the actual evaluation. Explain how they will be tested and what is expected of them. Providing students with examples of model answers to past papers, for example, gives them a clear idea of the standards they should be aiming for. The Economics Network has excellent resources on this.

2. Before students have to submit an assessed piece of work, post a piece of work with errors and suggest that they:

1. comment and mark it following specific criteria;
2. write suggestions for improving the work;
3. bring their conclusions to the lecture or tutorial to share with colleagues;
4. in the lecture or tutorial, give 5 minutes for international and UK students to share their conclusions in mixed groups.

When students hand in their work for assessment, a way of addressing the multiple tensions referred to above is as follows:

1. We post a numbered list of formative comments on particular difficulties, frequent misinterpretations and errors on VLE or by email.
2. We suggest that the students reflect on the completed task, and conduct self-evaluation in their own time with reference to the numbered list we provided.
3. We ask the students to bring a copy of their self-evaluated work to the following lecture or tutorial.
4. We address the points on the numbered list in plenary.

This gives international students a chance of understand better the type of feedback they are likely to receive, and to have an idea of what to expect.

Top Tip

We can provide students with a list of common issues that they can use for self-assessment, and use the same list when we assess the work, as a way to provide consistency of terms of reference. If new patterns of errors emerge, we can distribute them to complement the previous list.

Fullekrug *et al.* (2007) engaged in an assessment protocol that included students sharing their lecture notes online with other students and with the lecturers. This became an interesting strategy to share understanding of the topic and to complement, clarify and/or correct the notes. The co-created lecture notes were compiled as a comprehensive booklet which led to a sense of group ownership. This type of assessment increased focus and purpose. The staff involved learnt the common difficulties presented by the subject and the time spent assessing the work was effectively reduced.

A word about language. Even though some international students will come to the UK to '*master* the language to perfection', once they stop attending English language courses their level of written English can deteriorate rapidly. Therefore, whilst as lecturers or teachers we do not have the time or training to provide written commentaries on language use, it is advisable to make a sensitive remark about general language use (e.g. relating to word structure, making plurals and using articles).

8. Where next?

- **Further reading**
- **Web resources**

All links were last checked on 27 October 2021.

Further reading

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Caruana, V. and Spurling, N. (2007) The Internationalisation of UK Higher Education: a review of selected material. Project Report
https://www.sussex.ac.uk/webteam/gateway/file.php?name=lit-review-internationalisation-of-uk-he-v2&site=44

Outcomes from institutional audit. Arrangements for international students. Second series (Archive.org copy)
http://web.archive.org/web/20090605170849/http://www.qaa.ac.uk/reviews/institutionalAudit/outcomes/series2/InternationalStudents.asp

Library services for international students, SCONUL
http://www.sconul.ac.uk/publication/library-services-for-international-students

Jones, E. and Brown, S. (eds) (2007) Internationalising Higher Education: Enhancing Learning, Teaching and Curriculum and a review by Lee, C. (2008)
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Appleton, J., Hirst, S., Leggott, D. Mwanje, Z. Stapleford, J. (2008) Hands-on Internationalisation, edited by David Killick, Leeds Metropolitan University
http://eprints.leedsbeckett.ac.uk/2813/1/Hands_on_Internationalisation.pdf

Web resources

Assessing group work
http://web.archive.org/web/20210224194725/https://melbourne-cshe.unimelb.edu.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0003/1770717/Group.pdf

Advice for students unfamiliar with assessment practices in Australian higher education **http://web.archive.org/web/20170220015639/http://melbourne-cshe.unimelb.edu.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0004/1770709/IntStaff.pdf**

A 14-minute video useful for reflecting about learning and teaching in large classes in general. It is not aimed at learning and teaching international diverse student cohorts so we believe activities need to be introduced more frequently considering a 7–10 minute attention span rather than the 20 minute proposed as we discuss in section *8*.

Teaching Large Classes. A video featuring Graham Gibbs http://learningandteaching.dal.ca/vhtest/largeclasses.html (broken link)

A useful reference for students is the OU's online resource on mathematics and statistics, Chapter 3 'The language of proof'. This can be accessed at

http://web.archive.org/web/20181001235937/http://www.open.edu/openlearn/ocw/pluginfile.php/622840/mod_resource/content/1/m208_5_section3.pdf

A good source of information for graphics can be found at http://personal.ashland.edu/jgarcia/Macroeconomics%20233/MacroEconPowerpt2004/Chap002a%20Graphing.ppt (broken link)

The University of Leeds Language Centre has an easy-to-use, self-paced interactive resource that can be an excellent tool to support international students: **http://web.archive.org/web/20091124063117/http://www.leeds.ac.uk/languages/resource/english/graphs/tren.htm**

National Student Forum. Annual Report 2008. Available at **http://dera.ioe.ac.uk/id/eprint/14220**

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Dolan, M. (2012) "Supporting International Students of Economics in UK Higher Education", in *The Handbook for Economics Lecturers*. **https://www.economicsnetwork.ac.uk/handbook/international_support**

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Economics Network Online Learning and Teaching Materials
http://www.economicsnetwork.ac.uk/links/othertl.htm

Fullekrug, M., Astin, I. Taylor, A., Goodwin, A., Hillier, S. and Dolan, M. (2007)
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Views on request

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